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ABSTRACT

The precision and poetic logic of the language used by Anton Chekhov in his plays, particularly "The Sea Gull," can be explored through an analysis of his use of dialogue, characterization, and imagery. Measuring the nature of a relationship, rather than providing a direct literal interchange, the dialogue is both social, when individual expression is subordinated to the various voices of the group, and private, when one of two individuals has an opportunity for lengthy self-expression. Through the language expressed in the play, the characterization develops the interaction between the character's self-presentation and his or her situational context, demonstrates the dissonance that occurs between what a person says and what is known about him or her, demonstrates complementary tendencies within a particular character, and establishes characteristic modes of communication for each individual. Existing within the dimension of time, the imagery possesses communicative immediacy, reveals the spiritual life of a character, and functions as a communicative device when it provides shared meaning with other characters. (MAI)

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A COMMUNICATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHEKHOVIAN DRAMA AS PORTRAYED IN THE SEA GULL

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the functions and dimensions of Chekhovian language. The authors make observations within this analysis which apply to the playwright's major works, and The Sea Gull, in particular. The analysis is performed in relationship to Chekhov's creation of dialogue, characterization, and imagery. Dialogue is seen to measure the nature of a relationship more than provide an interchange of direct literal significance. Characterization appears to develop as a function of the dynamic interaction between a character's self-presentation and his/her situational context and to be achieved within the linguistic structure of the play through the use of dissonances between what a character says and what is known about him/her, or harmonies evident when characters demonstrate complementary tendencies, and through the creation of characteristic modes of communication. Finally, imagery is seen to evolve as a function of the spiritual life of a character, acting a communicative device depending upon its ability to provide shared meaning with other characters.

A COMMUNICATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHEKHOVIAN DRAMA AS PORTRAYED IN THE SEA GULL

Investigation of Anton Chekhov's dramatic works requires close attention to the language of each play. Too often, in production and in critical studies, there is an apparent failure to comprehend the precision and poetic logic of Chekhov's language.

The following analysis represents an exploration of the functions and dimensions of Chekhov's use of language in The Sea Gull. This play involves many of the distinctive techniques which were to become more fully refined and developed in his later plays. This analysis is performed in view of the way in which Chekhov employs language in the creation of dialogue, characterization, and imagery. In each case, observations are made which apply to his major plays. These observations are then developed in relationship to The Sea Gull.

Dialogue

Dialogue in Chekhov's major plays allows an immediate perception of character within the contextual present. It is not merely a vehicle for the progressive revelation of significant information.

Within Chekhov's dramatic dialogue, direct expression by a character is rarely equal to its task of achieving a shared meaning. Only infrequently does this dialogue result in any change in attitude or behavior, as it might be expected to do in the standard continental drama of the time. Dialogue in the latter was strategically paced to heighten expectation, to sharply delineate the opposition of wills, and to make available progressively greater doses of crucial information. Such dialogue was charged with the potentiality of bringing about some behavior or realization, and ultimately described clearly and vividly the impact of whatever behavior and realization it had helped to effect. In Chekhovian drama, however, dialogue does not crackle with the same theatrical electricity. Indeed, it generates little suspense, fails to display any conspicuous ingenuity, and the force of an individual utterance is repeatedly

vitiated by the lack of any real comprehension or interest on the part of the character to whom it may be addressed.

Not only is this use of dialogue a truer rendering of human attempts at communication than that portrayed in the contemporary continental drama, but it is also a dramatically effective dialogue which measures the nature of a relationship more than it emphasizes an interchange of direct literal significance. For example, a loss of shared reality between characters is suggested in the frequent use of the cut-off statement, where the character senses the inability of his/her receiver to understand his/her meaning. The audience, indeed, gains something other than verbal information from such caesuras. It discovers the essence of the relationship or emotion which has brought about a disintegration of communicative connectedness between characters. An illustration of just this occurs when Masha is on the verge of expounding her own view of existence to Medvedenko in Act I, and she abruptly cuts herself off: "But you'd never understand that." The quality of their relationship is clearly indicated here, and the agonized isolation of Masha is given simple and effective demonstration.

Chekhov's dramatic dialogue may be considered in two essential groupings: (1) the social dialogue in which individual expression is subordinated to the various voicings of the group; and (2) the private revelation, limited usually to two individuals, in which some character has a chance at fairly full and extended expression.

The pattern of dialogue within the social context is beautifully exemplified in Act IV of The Sea Gull in the game of lotto. The characters are engaged in a mutual experience of a highly superficial nature, while subsurface attitudes and emotions break through for moments of illumination and then sink below the surface again, leaving it utterly unaffected. The seemingly trivial nature of such an activity disguises the malice or pathos of apparently innocuous statements.

For example, when Trigorin wins at the game of lotto, Arkadina exclaims before the disconsolate Treplyov: "This man wins at everything, always!" While the language has apparent innocence and limited application, there is a great deal of subsurface antagonism between characters.

Those characters who attempt to speak in the social context must, as in the logic of the parlor game, wait for an opportunity to assert themselves. As with the game of lotto, the characters celebrate the announcement of any value with which they can identify. Their responses are organized by the patterns which have already been predetermined. Sorin, for example, has one neat organizing principle for all of his extemporizing. It is his story, told in pieces throughout the play, of "l'homme qui a voulu." From our first encounter with him, he relates the narrative of his life's failure at the slightest provocation. Should he be interrupted, as he is in Act I when he must chasten Masha about the barking of her dog, he resumes the narrative thread later as though his thought were never broken.

Thus, the character's response can be triggered by a reference to some detail in a preceding communication, to which he can relate his idiosyncratic narrative of self-depiction. This often has a kind of editorial effect upon the preceding statement, as it is not accepted in its entirety, but rather for a point it suggests to another person. We gain perspective on characters in accord with the extent that they make their meanings understood to their receivers. We also identify the receivers by their receptivity to the previous communication.

For those individuals with any genuine emotional intensity, who ache for some authentic communicative contact, verbal expression is often either impatiently discarded or given a heightened form. Often they attempt to communicate indirectly through symbols -- Masha wears black, Treplyov gives the sea gull to Nina, Nina gives the inscribed medal to Trigorin -- all of which have no immediate

meaning until the reference is established. But this language of symbols remains hopelessly one-sided, since a symbolic gesture can be accepted or rejected on any terms without a shared context. Nina, for example, accuses Treplyov of "talking in symbols" ever since his play failed. She claims she is "too simple to understand" him, when actually she is not too simple, she has no interest. Treplyov had expressed himself in an intensified language without any external response. He was not obscure, however. He was lucid, but the substance of his communication proved annoying and was, therefore, ignored. It is clear that even words of heightened stature do not carry meaning when the receiver has no capacity for response. There is a direct parallel made shortly thereafter when Nina encounters Trigorin. She again protests her unwillingness to understand: "I refuse to understand you." In this case, however, she is attempting to maintain her awe before the man in spite of his self-deprecation. This gives a clear idea of her willful incapacity to see anything but what she wishes to see.

Nina rejects Treplyov's condensation of meaning in symbols but encourages Trigorin to become expansive in his self-description. Trigorin was said by Sorin to "never open his mouth," a statement which Treplyov supported, and yet when Trigorin talks to Nina, he opens up for the only time in the entire play. The private dialogue between Trigorin and Nina shows how uniquely they relate to one another and yet also how incompletely. She allows him temporarily to be expansive, and she is fascinated, held in rapt attention.

Characterization

Characterization in the major plays of Chekhov is achieved as a function of the dynamic interaction between the character's self-presentation and his/her context. What the characters say, like what they do, is simultaneously qualified, transmuted, or accentuated by their reaction to larger situational contexts.

In much of the continental drama of Chekhov's time, language was designed

to be maximally tensive. It was precisely timed in its informational role, and the light it throws on characterization is direct and sharp. What the characters declare about themselves, the way their declarations involve us, and what is said about them is sufficient to provide definition and provoke anticipation. However, in the Chekhovian play, where a character's self-expression is likely to be met by his/her receiver with indifference or incomprehension, it is clear that language is no longer progressively tensive and that it no longer describes character with the same directness. The character's communicative behavior cannot seem to be completely persuasive in an unsupportive context. It has only partially to do with his/her total context and, hence, with his/her total characterization.

Characterization is not achieved through language by the delineation of conventional character types. In point of fact, most Chekhovian characters desire passionately to totally embody some role, to be defined by some single quality of experience, and they frequently identify themselves with supportive contexts which lie either in the future or in the past. They might prefer to embody the conventional character "types" they resemble -- the successful writer or actress, the aspiring young artist, the philosophical doctor, or the garrulous senex -- but such identities are not supported by their context. Some interruption or transition restrains them from engaging in the direct activity they believe to be proper to themselves. The characters must, therefore, be understood within the total field or context in which they are described socially, physically, and temporally. We come to know them most fully by the way they relate to the various situational contexts in which they are involved over the period of time the play depicts.

Rather than regarding the characters in isolation, we may regard their interrelation within the dynamics of their context. Contextual characterization is achieved within the linguistic structure of the play through the use of recognizable dissonances between what a character says and what we have learned

about him/her, or through the use of striking harmonies which are evident when characters reflect complementary tendencies. Dissonance is achieved ironically. Two elements are set off against one another, or in reaction to one another. Such dynamic opposition is apparent even in the selection of pairs of characters: Trigorin-Treplyov, Arkadina-Nina, Dorn-Sorin. In each pair, one character has had more than his/her share of what the other desperately craves for, which results in constant tension, if not antagonism, between them. The perception of harmony attends the recognition of how what a character says may be paralleled or echoed at another point within the play. The discovery of the interaction between character and context allows the perception of dynamic pattern within the play. As well as contextual characterization, characters are identified or defined directly through language. Both the direct and the contextual modes of characterization may be seen in The Sea Gull.

Characterization can be realized directly by creating characteristic modes of communicative behavior. The stiffness of the language of Medvedenko, for example, his capacity for stating a question as an unobtrusive affirmative ("You will call us then.") reveals his awkward and tentative nature. Sorin's continual vitiation of the force of any statement with the "and so on" signals his inability to give forceful expression to the desires he always speaks of having had.

Characterization is achieved directly in the description of one character by another, such as Treplyov's description of Trigorin in Act I of The Sea Gull. But such judgments are too dependent upon the character's feelings to be utterly persuasive. However, when language suggests an objective and unconsciously accurate depiction, we feel the revelation to be of real validity.

Contextual characterization is achieved when the character betrays more about himself/herself than he/she knows or intends when some critical assessment of him/her is given ironic validation by his own unwitting testimony. The

recognition of this technique provides a means to evaluate Trigorin, Treplyov, and Nina as artists. Trigorin complains that his stories are considered to be superficial. He laments that on his tombstone he will be remembered as "a delightful writer." He says he feels stirred to write about "the water here, the trees, the sky," and then later gives a direct reaction to the potential object of his portraiture: "How delightful it all is!" The repetition of the word "delightful" establishes the ironic connection between the critical reaction to his writing and the man himself. He has not beeen misunderstood, the superficiality of his writing is a reflection of the superficiality of his response to his world. His perception of events is severly limited by a kind of surface preoccupation.

Treplyov complains, in Act IV, that his own writing depicts such romantic clichés as "the far off sound of a piano dying away in the still, sweet scented air." This is delivered after he has been playing "a melancholy waltz" on the piano in the distance. His statement about the hopeless romanticism of his writings reflects the state of his life. Nina also makes the unconscious revelation when she relates: "I am drunk when I'm on the stage. I feel I'm beautiful." "Drunk" is a word rich in irony after we have heard "her acting was crude, without any taste, her gestures were clumsy."

Chekhovian characters establish relationships which are founded upon images of one another which contrast with the reality of their situations. Nina evokes a certain use of language from others when speaking with her, and, ultimately, in their treatment of her. Although she is soon to embark upon a career and leave her homeland, she is often addressed as though she were very young. Sorin speaks tc her at one point, "caressingly, as if to a child." More important, Trigorin, too, treats her as more of a child than she is. He addresses her in diminutives in the first interaction he has alone with her. He wonders what sort of "little person" she is. This minimizing vision of

her directly complements her magnified vision of his powers. He is impressed with her smallness, she with his greatness. By this complementary diminuition and exaggeration, both of which derive from inaccurate perceptions, Chekhov establishes the nature of their relationship. It embodies a delusion similar to that which appeared in the first example with Sorin, but here, of course, it is shared, and ultimately ruinous.

While characters do not seem to fulfill themselves in mutually enriching and enduring relationships, their profound interrelatedness within the play is described through language. This may be seen in the suggestions of a transference of a characteristic mode of expression from one character to another, indicating the influence of, possession by, or similarly to some kindred soul. This may be seen in the relationship between Trigorin and Nina who interchange characteristic vocabulary or modes of expression. Trigorin says in Act III that he is "drawn" to Nina, her very expression in Act I of the attraction she felt toward him. He speaks of being possessed by "sweet, marvelous, dreams," again, words out of Nina's repertoire. Nina's letters after her affair with Trigorin are described by Treplyov as "clever," a term highly uncharacteristic of any of Nina's previous communications, but used by Treplyov in characterizing Trigorin's communications. With regard to Treplyov, there is a clear parallel between his hopeless love for Nina and the futile love which Masha had felt for him throughout the play. He arrives at her state of despondency, and suddenly can be heard to express himself with her very characteristic utterance: "I feel as if I'd been living in the world for ninety years..."

Imagery

Imagery in the Chekhovian play exists within the dimension of time. The metamorphosis of the image in time clearly reflects the spiritual life of the character with whom it is associated.

Imagery functions both for the purpose of a vivid immediacy and for thematic development. Chekhov's imagery communicates with extreme economy the quality of a moment in a complex human relationship and provides a framework for the most effective exploration of certain values by translating them into concrete terms. There are important transformations of value (and often of form) with regard to the images. The image itself has its own life history. It exists in time and may be seen and evaluated according to stages of its metamorphosis. In all Chekhovian plays, certain characters express themselves through images which interpenetrate diverse levels of experience, in unique flashes of insight, for the sake of communicative projection. However, as time passes, these characters withdraw from life by placing some image or images between themselves and the rest of the world, thereby becoming insulated from the immediate and denying further insight or communication.

Initially the imagery "lives" because it has communicative immediacy and bespeaks, in the character who originated it, a creativity with which he/she resists automatized speech and, hence, behavior. However, when an image becomes a static special term in the personal vocabulary of a character, perhaps a referent to past experience or a symbol of loss, then that image "dies." Its connotations are private and, most importantly, it reveals the character's accepting automatism. The life of the image becomes an analogue to the life of the character.

The metamorphosis of an image may be seen in the case of the sea gull. It was conceived metaphorically by Nina as a vivid connection of disparate experiences necessary to communicate how her "heart is full," and it serves her as an expression of her immediate aspirations. Treplyov takes the life of a sea gull, and offers it as a symbol which is deliberately ominous, rather than spontaneously immediate. The connotative value of the image is diminished, the reference becomes personal, and there is no communicative efficacy. For Trigorin the image becomes only an "idea" and is perceived externally, abstractly. By the end of the play, its meaning has completely evaporated for him, and he has forgotten its significance.

This process reflects upon his own spiritual emptiness and the mediocrity of his writing. He could not see the actual application of the image to life; it was merely an image for a story. For Nina, by the end of the play, the image has hardened to the point of fixation. It is a function of obsession rather than communication. It is saturated with remembrance and a sense of loss, haunting the individual who once innocently associated it with fulfillment.

Final Remarks

The purpose of this paper has been to provide an analysis of the functions and dimensions of language in Chekhovian drama, The Sea Gull, in particular. This analysis was performed specifically in terms of Chekhov's creation of dialogue, characterization, and imagery. As a final note to this analysis, it is interesting to point to the number of communicative axioms which are illustrated repeatedly throughout Chekhov's development of these three components: (1) the contextual nature of communication; (2) the use of nonverbal images as communicative devices; (3) the relevance of shared meaning in communicative efficacy; (4) the adoption of individual characteristic modes of communicative behavior; (5) the relevation of self-concept and assumptions of the way in which others perceive us through communication; (6) the ability of communication to define and reveal the nature of a relationship between individuals; and (7) the interconnected quality of communicative experience.